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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS

Summary

-- Lead reports in all papers over the past two days, January 25-26, focus on developments related to the Palestinian legislative elections.

Editorial Commentary

-- "Palestinian elections: an opportunity for peace"

Center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (01/26) editorializes: "The elections of Palestine, although being held under occupation and with the participation of a limited number of Palestinians, send a strong message about the Palestinian people's ability to deal positively with what is possible . despite the daily oppression they suffered and continue to suffer. It is a very strong message from the Palestinians to the world. Those who are heading to the ballot boxes, even those bearing arms, are telling the world that they are ready for a historical solution that would give them a reasonable level of sovereignty, freedom and independence and, if not over all their usurped land, then over a part of it.. What gave special flavor to these unique elections is Hamas' participation, which has been a thorn in the U.S. administration's side in particular, because the rise of Hamas to power will only be a nightmare for America, particularly as Hamas insists on its ideologies towards Israel and adoption of armed struggle. Banning Hamas from taking part in the elections would have been the bullet of mercy fired by Washington itself on its own project for spreading democracy in the Middle East.. The entire scene constitutes an opportunity for resuming the political settlement. It is a lesson that Israel should learn well. The Palestinian fought with their blood for a hundred years and refused to give in to the occupation. Today they go to the ballot boxes in the hope of opening a hole in the wall through which they may be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel, the light of their independent state. It is up to Israel and its leadership. They either deal realistically with this opportunity or they bury themselves in the sand and prepare to dig more graves for them and for the Palestinians."

-- "It's a sin!"

Daily columnist Nahed Hattar writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (01/25): "We are happy for our brethren in the occupied Palestinian territories for the elections that are going to be held today in accordance with a semi-democratic law that we, in Jordan, only wish for. The Palestinian voter, after all, will have the right to elect individual candidates and at the same time select a list of candidates that is in line with his political preference, while the Jordanian voter is still prisoner to the one-man one-vote election method! We, on the other hand, are not happy for the Palestinians for more than that. This is because the elections are taking place under occupation and within the framework of the Oslo accords that have ruled out more than half of the Palestinian people found in refugee camps from taking part in the Palestinian political process. This, in itself, means political and practical acceptance of folding the refugee issue and limiting the Palestinian cause to the confines of a Palestinian entity resulting from the Oslo accords, which is limited to Gaza and some of the West Bank. The Palestinian election process has witnessed extensive financial and political American intervention in favor of the 'secular' parties, foremost among which is Fatah, the Palestinian Authority's party. Yet, the major Islamic opposition force, Hamas, is not beyond the current scene of understanding with the Americans. Hamas, after all, participates in the Palestinian elections on the basis of the Oslo accords . and this participation means

getting involved in the project of a Palestinian entity whose borders and aspects are determined through negotiations with Israel and under American protection and on the basis of excluding the refugee issue.. The Palestinian factions agreed to be involved in a bilateral peace process based on the de facto acceptance of separating the Palestinian path from the other Arab paths and even from the Palestinians outside the Occupied Territories. Thus, the Palestinian issue became an internal Israeli issue determined by conflicts and coalitions between Israeli parties. The occupation still stands; the colonialist wall still eats up the West Bank; the settlements are still there; the prisoners are still in prisons; and Israeli bullets still take the lives of Palestinians in their homes, streets and mosques. I believe that negotiating with Israel under these conditions is more than a sin. It is a strategic mistake."

-- "The elections of Palestine"

Chief Editor Taher Odwan writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (01/25): "Interest in these [Palestinian] elections on the regional and international levels is much more than it was in the recent Iraqi elections. The reason is that people do distinguish between one election and another and one occupation and another. The Palestinians have been in a long-standing struggle against the occupation in order to regain their rights and their homeland. The election is a stage on this road and a confirmation of the identity of the land and the people in the face of a Zionist project that has long been based on nullifying the existence of the Palestinians, land and people.. Flaws that affect these elections do not undermine or diminish the historical importance of the Palestinian elections, because, under all the circumstances, the elections serve the people's struggle and their long march towards liberation from occupation and towards establishing their independent state. The elections are a tool of the struggle that is strengthened by its democratic mechanisms. This is the first time that the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are going to exercise political democracy where all factions and parties wage the battle to win the support of the public opinion on the basis of their policies and programs.. It is fair to say that the Palestinian President's method, wisdom, open-mindedness and faith in the democratic approach have contributed to creating this healthy atmosphere, and this in turn will certainly contribute to the completion of the democratization and, more importantly, the re-establishment of state institutions, focusing on the future state that is founded not on chaos and corruption, but on the rule of law and national institutionalism."

-- "Hamas' hypothetical victory"

Columnist Jawad Bashiti writes on the op-ed page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (01/25): "The historical political shift might happen today, but it will not happen unless the Hamas movement wins the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, thus acquiring the right to form a Palestinian government under its leadership or to stop the formation of a government that is not acceptable to it. Such a shift remains hypothetical until that time when the voting is over and the results are announced. Having said that, what is certain is that the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza will, as of today, have a legislative council that is the strongest since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. This in itself is a historical achievement that all the Palestinians must preserve and strengthen.. If Hamas wins the majority, then a new internal conflict might arise, which would start as the Palestinian Authority tries to confirm that it is the center of authority in the Palestinian political system.. In this case, Israel would say that Hamas' victory would not mean the rise of a new Palestinian partner, rather the belated demise and burial of the old Palestinian partner. It would also say that it had committed to peace negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization and that this Organization is no longer leading the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza . and that the Palestinians chose to cast out the option for a solution through political negotiations. This would lead to more unilateral solutions on the part of Israel.. The correct political game that the Palestinian people need starting today is one that allows the establishment of a strong Palestinian opposition in parliament lead by Hamas which refrains at the same time from entering the government."

-- "What next?"

Columnist and former Minister of Information Saleh Qallab writes on the back-page of semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (01/25): "Frankly, after today's elections, if Hamas does not change and turn around, then it is going to melt and disappear slowly like a burning candle. These elections are historically pivotal for the march of the Palestinian people, and participating in them just to win seats is not enough. The important thing is what is to come. So, it is important for Hamas to ask itself as soon as the polls close this evening: what next?"

HALE